

THE PAELLA

THE PAELLA IS NOT ONLY A HEALTHY, EXQUISITE, UNIQUELY-FLAVOURED RICE-MEAL; IT IS ALSO A WONDERFUL VISUAL SPECTACLE IN THE BAROQUE TRADITION AND A SORT OF COLLECTIVE RITUAL OF THE VALENCIAN RURAL WORLD.

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Along with the Chinese, it is we –the Valencians, the Southern Catalans– who know best how to prepare and eat rice. Just as the Italians, another great Mediterranean people, have created an inexhaustible gastronomic marvel such as pasta from flour, we, the Valencians, have done the same with rice. One could go so far as to say, without the slightest exaggeration, that a traditional Valencian family eats a plate of rice for lunch every day of the year. It would be a serious mistake, though, to think that this meant they ate the same every day. The range of dishes that can be made with this product is so enormous, that in Valencian homes, though rice is always made, a different dish is eaten every day. There are four styles –soupy, dry, in the oven or in the paella– that, depending on the equipment used, form the basis of this infinite variety. From here, and depending on the vegetables in season (a large part of Valencia is extremely fertile land that produces vegetables all the year round) and the other ingredients (meat or fish, according to the area, availability and weather), there

are a thousand and one ways, as in the oriental tales, to savour the moment of eating.

Out of all these possibilities, the one that is best known and internationally famous is the paella. The paella is not only a healthy, exquisite, uniquely-flavoured meal of rice; it is also a wonderful visual spectacle in the baroque tradition and a sort of collective ritual of the Valencian rural world. And if it owes its generic name to the recipient it is cooked in –a flat, two-handled metal pan of the size necessary for the number of people invited–, its fame is due to the international promotion over the last few years of its image of colour and fantasy: almost a gastronomic carnival. The truth is that we Valencians, a sensual people from the Mediterranean South, don't only eat with our mouths, but with our eyes, as we say.

Nevertheless, a word of warning is necessary for those who go about the world asking for *paella valencia*, a dish which normally appears on the menus of restaurants dedicated to so-called international cuisine, and which in fact is an extremely recent bastard invention

designed to satisfy the indiscriminating greed of some tourists. There is no single *paella valenciana* but many; there are countless styles –family, local, regional– in which rice can be prepared in a paella. And precisely that which is presented as typical –with little meat and few vegetables but lots of sea-food– is the least authentic or traditional of all. The paella, which originated as an outdoor meal for picnics, has as its basic ingredients those which the ancient rural Mediterranean civilization produced, and which gastronomic imagination has learnt to combine through centuries of practice. To illustrate this fact, though it may seem a cultural-anthropological *boutade*, in the depths of his heart the present writer holds dear the memory of an inspired paella, made with eels, frogs and chicken for meat, and with the vegetables supplied by the fields of Gandia. An exotic local touch? Maybe. But good cooking, authentic cooking, is always that: a local, family or individual art or custom, which others see, sense, taste as an unpredictable exoticism.